

**Miloslav Petrušek: Societies of the Late Modern Age**  
Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON), Prague 2006, 459 pages.

People celebrating their birthday usually get presents, particularly if it is a round number. I suppose Miloslav Petrušek received presents from his relatives and friends when he turned 70 in October 2006. To commemorate his anniversary, however, he himself made a present to Czech and Slovak sociological community, and indeed all social scientists – his book *Societies of the Late Era*, published by Prague's Sociological publishing house SLON. The very publishing house that ten years ago announced the publication of his book *What is Sociology* which was highly anticipated by many of us but in the end never arrived. Fortunately, this loss was compensated by Petrušek's competent and readable afterwords in other books – translations of several sociological classics and contemporary authors published by SLON, which for more than a decade due to lack of a proper textbook of history of sociology served as a substitute of the latter in Czech and Slovak republics. To name a few I will mention Petrušek's extensive profiles of Durkheim (in *Sociology and Philosophy*), Veblen (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*), Simmel (*Money in Modern Culture and Other Essays*), Merton (*Studies in Sociological Theory*) Mills (*The Sociological Imagination*) and Giddens (*The Consequences of Modernity*).

Whenever Petrušek publishes a book it is a small feast. First reason is their scarcity – the interval in which they appear are decades rather than years – until 1989, his absence was even longer and involuntary. Those who know his writings and his sociological knowledge of encyclopaedic dimensions understand that this is not because he has little to say to his readers. The second and more significant reason for celebration when reading Petrušek is the fact that his writing is absorbing and fascinating, and with his style, he is able to get his readers not only intellectually, but also emotionally interested in the subject of his research (we probably do not have a sociologist with such publishing and almost literary qualities in Slovakia. For all these reasons, Petrušek is a classic of contemporary Czech sociology and within the science, he is respected as a theorist, author and critic, diligent academic leader and last but not least excellent and inspiring teacher. Those who have been lucky to sit in his lectures know how easy it is afterwards to choose the academic path and become a professional sociologist.

*Societies of the Late Modern Age* consists of a long introduction (*Introduction to Sociology of Modern Societies*) of over 40 pages, and main body comprising 107 mostly two-word entries – the word „society“ combined with either an adjective or a noun – that occur in sociology and other social sciences and denote modern and post-modern societies. These entries are arranged alphabetically and usually familiarise readers with the genesis of the term, temporal context, socio-cultural connections, original meaning as well as those acquired later, characteristics of the particular type of society, viewpoints of other authors who cooperated with Petrušek as well as his own position and evaluation. To use author's own words, „the purpose is to provide an overall portrayal of the society we live in, societies we encounter and those we historically succeed“. (p. 51) This remarkable book is similar to a dictionary (in terms of its structure, not the range of entries or style) but at the same time can be seen as scientific-theoretical interpretation. We can say it is an original introduction to sociology as well as linguistically rich essay, respectable sociological analysis with a wide span concentrating on one central topic of societies of a „late“ era, but in still another sense a post-modern collage. Toward the end of his introduction, author himself seems to have slipped into the role of a book critic when he writes that his book „may be a very unique, 'non-text book' introduction to sociology: although it is not the story of sociology, it uses sociological terminology, sociological concepts, theories and authorities. Wherever necessary, references to them are used and reproduced; in this sense, book requires the reader to be rather patient.“ (p. 51) Of course, patience is a prerequisite when reading any scientific text. However Petrušek's book can be viewed selectively if we just jump from one entry that is of interest to another, but thanks to its essay-style it can also be read right from the beginning until the end as a rather exciting story about the society we lived in and live in today, about what the future holds for us, and about the illusions we cherished and lost, a story of our expectations and the disillusionment we feel if they do not come true. Such continual reading may have its charm – the entry „active society“ and „accelerating society“ will not follow each other as they would if they were sorted according to the topic, but will be found at opposite ends of the book. Socialist society comes right after the entry describing polite society – and as there are still many people (even within the academic circles) who see certain parallels between them, the fact that they are placed right next to each other gives these people a better opportunity to notice the huge differences between Socialist and polite society, while at the same time demonstrating how far we still are from a polite society and asking if we are not at the moment moving away from it rather than toward it. After all, „polite society is possible if we 'return' to the elementary axiom that human needs are essentially modest and that people are able to ask more serious questions than those which he is 'inspired' to ask by the mass media and political campaigns“. (p. 347)

Petrušek's book really is no story of sociology, author does not address sociology as a science as he did in his previous books (*Alternative Sociology*, 1992; *Theory and Method in Modern Sociology*, 1993) but instead looks at society reflected in sociological knowledge, making his book thus more attractive for readers who do not necessarily belong to sociological circles. But let me get back to the lengthy introduction where Petrušek explains the circumstances that inspired him to write a book on society which – unlike the historical eras of the past – begins to feel the urge to „name itself“. According to Petrušek, such a society is aware of its exclusivity and uniqueness, starts to identify itself through sociologists, political scientists and journalists and no longer needs a vision of being incorporated into historical evolution. Author claims this „denomination“ boom started in mid 20th century and sees links with temporary liberation of the Soviet imperial system – de-Stalinization – and with post-Industrialisation, i.e. socio-economic processes that were taking place in Western societies, had mass effects on everyday life of majority of the society and with respect to their historical unprecedentedness required some new terminology. The real denomination

boom occurs in the early 1970s. „We enter an era of denomination plurality“ (p. 16) that reflects the variety and ambiguity of the world we live in. According to Petrusek, problems may arise if we try to materialise this plurality into a large formula, which can nowadays be perceived as a totalising claim on a single binding perspective which will hardly be tolerated by post-modern individuals. However, Petrusek makes a distinction between the question on the purpose of history, a question that he considers controversial and irrelevant, and the issue of the sense of the present, that is the background setting for a society's need to give itself a name – which essentially is merely another way of asking „in what kind of society we are living“.

Petrusek borrowed the term „late era“ from J. Patočka and V. Bělohradský in order to avoid using the term „post-modern society“ but not because he wanted to distance himself from it. He has used the term „post-modern society“ before (see for example *The Theory and Method in Modern Sociology*) as well as working with the expression in *Societies of the Late Modern Age* in his periodisation of history of sociology where he identifies three stages: the era of classical sociology, the era of modern sociology and finally the era of post-modern sociology. In Petrusek's view, the latter differs from the earlier phases particularly because: 1. it is based on different intellectual incentives, 2. it broadens the range of topics and reintroduces players into the game, 3. utilises different linguistic forms (e.g. essays and metaphors). In agreement with Z. Bauman author thinks of our era as a „fully developed, vital system“ where a person's identity, his lifestyle and status are no longer determined by profession and work as a basic activity, as was the case in traditional and modern societies. This vacuum is filled by consumption, „a society is born where the Freudian vision of the relationship between reality and indulgence is turned upside down: reality no longer opposes indulgence“. (p. 33) Petrusek offers his own definition of a „late“ era, characterised by ten attributes: 1. significant transformation of production organisation, 2. new ways of life and pluralisation of lifestyles, 3. evolution of new formulae of consumer behaviour, 4. evolution, broadening and transformation of education, 5. significant rise in mass media influence, 6. using temptation instead of repression, 7. substantial changes in value systems, relativisation in the area of social deviations and system of social control, 8. the emergence of a new post-modern mentality, 9. contacts between different cultures and mutual interaction, 10. globalisation of economic and political processes and growing global risks. I have described these features in a more simple way, the author discusses them in more detail and has managed to produce a very accurate and complex summary of contemporary euro-Atlantic civilisation (though maybe his analysis of post-modern mentalities could be just a little more comprehensive). Petrusek's review of the nature of current society of the „late“ era is a perfect start to the main body of the book where he is using the puzzle method to tackle the same task: he goes on to describe societies of the „late“ era by accumulating many different expressions denoting various types of societies; this allows perceptive readers to observe the total as well as the intersections in search for a purposeful whole.

I would like to point out Petrusek's provocative deliberation on what it means to name a society, who, where and why decides on the name, what the name means for the named society. He demonstrates this by a textbook example of naming a society – that which we lived in prior to 1989. In a quotation that in short explains the character of this era more precisely than any long and sterile political analysis and at the same times serves to demonstrate sociological imagination and brisk style of the author he talks about the people who invented a „wonderful expression“, an abbreviated word mocking the term „totalitarianism“ „that, quite ironically, changed the radical ‚totalitarianism‘: it did not become nicer, only more stupid, just like in reality“. (p. 43)

Readers well aware of social sciences will find in the book many society types well known from the literature, albeit sometimes in new unexpected contexts. Such entries are for example authoritarian society, americanised, industrial, information, capitalist, mass, multicultural, plurality, post-industrial, post-modern, secularised, socialist societies, society of credit cards or the aging society. Sociologically educated reader will appreciate entries on active societies, collectivist, conservative, mcdonaldised, narcissist societies, premature societies, civil, organisation, post-Ford, post-material societies, societies that are rationally constructed, repressive, component societies; societies of end of organised capitalism, societies of labour, third wave, leisure, super-industrial societies, technocratic societies, transcultural societies and others – however this too may provide some adventurous reading. Those who are sceptic or like to be called realists will maybe be surprised by following adjectives used to describe societies: good, philanthropic, functioning, polite, tolerant, transparent or healthy – they also might find it interesting to read about society of alibi, cynical society, childish, acquisitive, commercial, lavish, populist society; society of poverty, technocratic society or wasting society. Those who like the prefix „post-“ can choose among seventeen various types of societies. And finally, for most of readers, entries such as loud society, carnival society, „funny“ society, masturbating, post-heroic, post-optimistic, spectacular, or „pay-for-all“ societies may come a little surprising and unexpected. It is curious that there is no separate entry on the so-called risk society which has been widely discussed for almost two decades; and in spite of mentioning the epoch of boredom and leisure as important indicators of societies of „late“ era, author did not dedicate these societies their own entries so expectant readers will not be able to find their analyses.

The book would be improved by author's register as well as a well-organised bibliography listing literature author has used and mentioned in his introduction. In some cases, this is where readers could search for some of the missing entries (example: Bryant Wilson's idea of the secularisation thesis as seen on p. 35).

Numerous book reviews, scholarly books as well as fiction end with a call upon the readers to by all means acquire the reviewed piece of writing as an essential book for their bookshelf. This book should be kept on a sociologist's table, rather than just on the shelf.

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